

Sanity and transparency needed



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SELDOM in the past few decades has this country so desperately needed a leadership that could steer it clear of the doldrums and chaos it is in now. Political intrigue, infighting, bickering and bankruptcy of ideas have almost become norms. Belying all expectations of a settlement, politics is headed towards a chaotic situation that spells disaster for the country already threatened by production cut in mills and factories because of frequent hartals and sieges.

The charisma that the ruling party had shown in the early stages of its tenure has almost faded out. People were impressed and animated when the prime minister told them that "this is a time of change, a change in the culture of corruption, poverty, violence and lawlessness." With the passage of time, people now are wondering if the euphoria was real. As it appears, administrative measures and actions these days appear to be indecisive, inconsistent and permissive toward corruption in high places.

One can take a little comfort from the fact that the country has been held together under trying circumstances. Yet there is a growing sense that the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism evinced by patriotism, sagacity, commitment and sacrifice by the teeming millions is under unremitting pressure from many quarters. Extremist forces and radical ideologies are making all kinds of demands in a way so as to destabilise the existing pattern and fabric of the society.

Although it seems outwardly calm, a trip across the country would reveal a mood of despair, anger, mute defiance and cynicism that could explode at any moment. Business community and peace loving citizens have demonstrated their anger through seminars and

discussion meets in an effort to ventilate their grievances. But this silence, one shudders to think, could burst into bloody clashes with one another, simply because the people are being pushed to the edge.

Unsurprisingly, this worsening situation has produced a new cadre that carries weapons and terrorises even the hungry and frail. The gruesome killing of Biswajit in broad daylight, and pushing-off of two textile engineers from a running train after snatching valuables from them, manifest the fear as well as lack of safety and security of the general populace either at home or on the road. Sadly true, such gruesome incidents are on the rise.

Apprehension, despondency and despair hang over the country as people ponder the difficulties and hardship in the days to come because of the state of business, transportation and non-functioning industrial sector. The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. None in the country would be immune to the pain in the event of a conflict. Worse, aggravated by party interest and hardening extremist lines, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond party interests.

As the political fever heats up, so increases the incidence of stalking, abduction and sexual abuse of school and college going girls. Sadia Akhtar Pinky (15), a student of class eight, was abducted by Rony on November 28 and rescued in the first week of December from Narayanganj. The incident prompted police to arrest Rony. Unable to bear with threats issued by the abductor's family about dire consequences unless the case against Rony was withdrawn, Pinky committed suicide.

Reports say that in 2010, 14 girls, all of them victims of sexual harassment, committed suicide because the abductors after coming out on bail started terrorising the victims and their families. Sadly, the guidelines

issued by the High Court in 2009 for such crimes are yet to be passed as laws, so the crimes continue unabated. All these crimes result from poor governance and lack of proper surveillance by the law enforcement agencies.

During the last four years the government squandered the opportunity of salvaging the economy and giving governance a shape that could fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the people. To a large extent, the AL government, in its 1996-2001 term, lived up to people's expectation and growth touched quite a remarkable height. But the performance in the second term of the AL government leaves much to be desired.

The finance minister has admitted that corruption in

government business has stalled vital development works in the country. But there appears to be little indication that the government has been up to its job to arrest the slide. Rather, reports revealed by the Comptroller and Auditor General suggest that there have been gross irregularities in the expenditure of nearly Tk.5000 crore public money by various ministries in the fiscal years between 2008 and 2011.

The words that some feel define this government are corruption, unaccountability, opacity, drift and paralysis. As the country sank into multi-million taka scandals like share market scam, Hall-Mark, Destiny and Jubok fraud, gloom descended on the marketplaces and houses. What the country misses the most is a

leader who could cleanse the mess and inspire a disenchanted country, and project a vision for the future. Prime Minister Sk. Hasina had the mandate and credentials to be that leader, but maybe she is not.

What emerges from reports published in the newspapers with sickening frequency has been a dismal story of serial bungling with none booked for the irregularities and wrongdoings committed. But there is still time to heal the wounds and make a comeback.

With controversy over the holding of the next parliamentary election between two mainstream political parties, the political atmosphere has heated up again. Tension has mounted in the whole country. But what is unintelligible to those who witnessed the bloody carnage resorted to by the brutal Pak army in 1971 on innocent people aided by the Razakars and their ilk, is why those of the Islamist parties who were born after the birth of Bangladesh or who were just kids during the liberation war and had no knowledge about the atrocities committed at that time, should be opposing this trial.

There is absolutely no reason that the streets of Dhaka and other cities should be turning into theatres of violence on issues that are trivial and do not have the support of the vast populace. Apprehension, despondency and despair hang over the country as people ponder the difficulties and hardship in the days to come because of the state of business, transportation and non-functioning industrial sector. The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. None in the country would be immune to the pain in the event of a conflict. Worse, aggravated by party interest and hardening extremist lines, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond party interests.

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Corruption -- Good news in a depressing context

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AN aggressive procession of high profile corruption cases for about a year or so, like Padma bridge project, Hall-Mark, Destiny, railway, share market, etc., has put the government into deep embarrassment, and the people in disengagement. To deepen frustrations, Bangladesh was ranked 24 steps lower than last year in international comparison according to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

Against this backdrop, the report on National Household Survey (NHS) 2012 released yesterday, (December 28), by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has shown a few positive results. 63.7% of the surveyed households have been victims of corruption one way or the other in the sectors covered by the survey. In terms of indicators comparable with the previous survey of the same series the rate of victimisation of corruption this year is 55.8%, whereas in 2010 it was 84%.

The survey shows, however, that the most important service delivery sectors affecting people's lives such as law enforcement, land administration, justice, health, education and local government, remain gravely affected by corruption. Moreover, in terms of implications measured by the amount of bribe the situation has worsened. In 2010 cost of bribery in the surveyed sectors was estimated at 1.4% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or 8.7% of annual national budget, whereas this year it has been estimated to be 2.4% of GDP and 13.4% of annual budget. The survey also shows once again that while corruption affects everyone, the poorer sections of the society suffer from it more.

Notably, the NHS has nothing to do with CPI released annually by the Berlin-based Secretariat of Transparency International. No data or analysis from this survey or any other research conducted by TIB is used in CPI, the 2012 version of which was released on December 5. The CPI provides score and rank of countries based on perception of prevalence of political and administrative corruption at the national level. NHS is not about perception or opinion. It is a survey of the experience of respondents while receiving services in selected public, private and NGO sectors. While CPI is based essentially on perception of high level corruption, NHS is about petty corruption at the service delivery end.

This year's NHS has been conducted on a sample size of 7,554 households selected randomly from all 64 districts of the country following the Integrated Multi-Purpose Sampling (IMPS) design of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. To ensure highest standard of methodological soundness and credibility of analysis TIB was guided by a panel of 6 reputed experts. At 95% confidence level the maximum possible margin of error of the results is estimated as +/- 4.0, which reflects highest level of reliability.

The survey shows that among the surveyed

sectors labour migration was the worst affected, with 77% of respondents as victims of corruption, followed by law enforcement (75.8%), land administration (59%), justice (57.1%), health (40.2%), education (40.1%) and local government (30.9%). In terms of geographic distribution, incidence of corruption has been found to be relatively higher in rural areas than urban, which reflects deep and wide spread of corruption.

Notably enough, in the labour migration sector where service recipients have been worst affected, most of the respondents have been victims in the hands of friends, relations or neighbours. This also indicates that the level of trust and access of potential migrants to the relevant public channels and processes are low, for which they resort to private sources. Moreover, women have been relatively more victimised. Parallel with institutional spread of corruption these are signs of erosion of societal values.

On the other hand, the survey shows that the higher the income and expenditure the higher the incidence of corruption. This may be because people belonging to higher expenditure category received services in more sec-

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tors the lower expenditure bracket (7 per household compared with 4). Moreover, people who earn and spend more, when faced with corruption, may also have a higher propensity to obtain services with relative ease by illicit transactions.

According to the survey data, the total national loss due to petty bribery has been estimated as Tk. 21,955 crores, which as earlier indicated, is as high as 13.4% of national budget or 2.4% of GDP. The loss is also estimated to be 4.8% of average annual household expenditure. More importantly, for households with lowest range of expenditures the rate of loss is much higher at 5.5% compared to those belonging to high spending bracket for whom it is 1.3%. In other words, the burden of corruption is more on the poorer sections of the society.

Compared to 2010, the incidence of corruption has come down in most of the surveyed sectors except health and a few grouped as "others," such as BRTA, Wasa, passport, appointment in public sector, BTCL and postal department. On the other hand, sectors that have recorded reduction in incidence of corruption are law enforcement, land administration, justice, local government, agriculture, electric-

ity, income tax and customs, education, banking, insurance and NGOs.

Factors that may have contributed to the reported improvement include possible positive impact, limited though, of awareness of and campaign on the Right to Information Act; introduction of citizens charter; information technology in some sectors and e-information service to Union Parishad level; anti-corruption training of public sector employees; positive role of some local government representatives; and growing awareness, public participation and engagement thanks to increasingly active role played by media and civil society.

However, while it is premature to determine the extent to which such initiatives have causal relationship with the positive result, it also remains to be seen if this marks a sustainable trend. Indeed, there is no scope of complaisance. Notably enough, as already mentioned, access to critically important sectors such as law enforcement, land administration, justice, health, education and local government remain highly vulnerable to corruption. Law enforcement has particularly shown insignificant improvement, as nearly 76% of respondents were victims of corruption in this sector compared to 79% in 2010. On the other hand, while corruption in the justice sector has reduced notably from 88.4% in 2010, it remains high at 57.1%.

In order to carry the positive result forward in a sustainable way, it is indispensable to enforce law most effectively without any favour, bias or fear, particularly for grand corruption, so as to promote accountable and transparent governance in all levels. Our biggest failure lies in not being able to send a strong signal that corruption is indeed a punishable offence for all.

We would nevertheless, like to move on in the New Year and beyond with a sense of optimism based on the good news from the survey. People's voice and demand must be strengthened for delivery on commitments made by political parties and leaders against corruption, which inspire us, especially when they reflect at least on paper what the people would like to see.

The reality is that too often do such commitments fail to meet delivery in practice. The burden of deficit of those who assume responsibility to govern riding on the gains achieved by passionate sacrifice made by the people falls on the people again and again. Hence, it is the people, constitutionally the most powerful and the only sovereign in democracy, who need to stand up. The stronger and more sustained is the voice and vigilance of people, particularly the youth, to demand law enforcement, rule of law, accountability and transparency, the better is the possibility of effective corruption control.

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The seven stages of working life



Working Life. Which stage are you at?

Stage one: The Intern.

Arrives late. Explains that he got lost. Told to make coffee. Makes undrinkable black gunge. Sits in on meetings at which he realises, with horror, that he knows nothing about anything being discussed. Spends most of the day feeling terrifyingly useless. Asks insane questions such as, "Please, sir, do we have to ask before we go to the toilet?" At midday, eats packed lunch from home.

Stage two: The Short-Contract Worker.

Arrives early. Waits outside till a staff member arrives with a key. Devotes all his energy to volunteering for assignments because he is desperate to get hired full-time. At lunch, he eats sandwiches at his desk while doing everyone else's work. He leaves the office last, at 9:00 pm, but still arrives the next morning before the rest of us.

Stage three: The New Hire.

Arrives slightly before other staff. First to take his seat at meetings. Talks constantly about "our vision." Starry-eyed and enthusiastic. Does much of the work that gets done, although he is constantly interrupted by older staff wandering into his room to sit on his desk and spout rubbish. Leaves at 8:00 pm.

Stage four: The Experienced Executive.

Arrives at exactly 9:00 am, not a minute early or late. Has a lot of work to do, but spends most of his time transferring it to other people. Occasionally buys lunch at the wine bar for people at stages one, two and three, because he enjoys the way they worship him. Leaves at 7:00 pm.

Stage five: The Senior Manager.

Strolls into the office at 9:40. Cannot avoid work completely, but does the bare minimum. Lunches at private club, practicing his "vice president" look of worldliness and ennui so as to be ready for the next stage. Sneaks out of the office on the dot of 6:00 pm.

Stage six: Vice President.

Languidly ambles into the office around 11:00. Finds work a total bore, so he gets people at stages one, two, three and four to do all of his work for him. Spends most of the day sitting on the desks of new hires to give them the benefits of his wisdom. Leaves the office at 5:00 pm pretending to be on the way to a client meeting.

Stage seven: Chairman.

Arrives late. Explains that he got lost because his memory is not what it was. Serves coffee from private percolator. Turns out to be undrinkable black gunge. Sits in on meetings at which he realises, with horror, that he no longer knows anything about what is being discussed. Spends most of the day feeling terrifyingly useless. Asks insane questions all the time, such as, "Shall we open some overseas offices, or have we already done that sort of thing?" Before leaving at 3:00 pm, he eats packed lunch from home because he can't eat anything without bran.

It's the circle of life.

By the way, every time you start a new job, you usually go back several stages. For example, I'm not a kid, but I am at Stage Three in my current job. What stage are you at?

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